

Proposal to CEPF: 64733- Strengthening the Conservation of the Gishwati Forest Reserve, Rwanda

Process Framework

Background

Members of Forest of Hope Association (FHA) have more than six years experience working with the community around the Gishwati Forest Reserve to restore this forest and its biodiversity- from 2008 through 2011 under the Great Ape Trust/Gishwati Area Conservation Program (GACP) and from 2012 to current under FHA.

The current status of the Gishwati Forest Reserve

The Gishwati Forest Reserve (GFR) is a secondary montane rainforest that used to be the largest forest in Rwanda, but through the years it has seen a reduction from 280 km² to just 6 km² (Plumptre et al., 2001). Fortunately since 2002, different actors in forest restoration and conservation have shown an interest in restoring it. In 2005, the Government Reforestation Project (*Projet d'Appui a l'Aménagement Forestier au Rwanda – PAFOR*) started restoring this forest following the relocation of local people away from this area into a zone where agricultural activities were permitted. The project increased the size of the forest from 600 hectares to 886 hectares. In 2008, the Great Ape Trust/Gishwati Area Conservation Program (GACP), an International Non Government Organization that worked on conservation of this forest from 2008 through 2011 increased its size up to 1,484 hectares. In January 2012, senior employees of GACP created FHA to maintain what was achieved under GACP. The Gishwati Forest Reserve is a home of a number of threatened species including: eastern chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii*, listed as Threatened on the IUCN Red List); golden monkeys (*Cercopithecus mitis kandti*, listed as Endangered); mountain monkeys (*Cercopithecus lhoesti*, listed as Vulnerable); and more than 130 species of birds including 14 that are endemic to the Albertine Rift and two IUCN Vulnerable species: Martial Eagle (*Polemaetus bellicosus*) and Grey Crowned Crane (*Balearica regulorum*).

The GFR is clearly demarcated. Under the facilitation of GACP, the forest boundaries were fixed in 2010 by Rwanda Natural Resources Authority (RNRA), Rutsiro District and four Sectors adjacent to the forest. The team was guided by local people who voluntarily showed the boundaries between their agricultural plots and the forest reserve land. The process was very successful, with local communities fully engaged from start to finish. Although some of them had been using the land for crop production, they knew that it was illegal and they appeared to recognize the need for reforestation and so did not resist the process of clearly demarcating the forest boundaries. During the demarcation, FHA and Rutsiro District delegates took GPS coordinates for the boundaries. At the end they prepared the map and the demarcation report that they shared with all stakeholders and local people. Also GACP paid for the cement markers to show the boundaries and paid local farmers who fixed them. In 2013, Rwanda Natural Resources Authority/department of Forestry and Nature Conservation (RNRA/FNC) confirmed the 2010 boundaries to be the boundaries of the park when this Reserve will be upgraded to a national park. The boundaries are in the draft law that RNRA/FNC and Rwanda Development Board (RDB) developed and discussed with stakeholders. The forest demarcation of 2010 was achieved through the reclamation of plots that had been illegally occupied by local people since 2002.

Currently, the core forest of 886hectares that was transformed into pastures before 2008 is completely regenerated, the number of chimpanzees that was estimated to 12 in 2002 is estimated to 29 with 24 individuals well known; the area of 336 hectares that was added to the core forest in 2008 is reforested and an area of 264 hectares that was added to the core forest in 2009 is under natural assisted regeneration. Water in local major rivers (Pfunda and Sebeya) is increasing in quantity and quality; and floods downstream are decreasing.

These positive changes results from the community engagement since 2008. Community is involved in all activities including forest protection, local development and outreach. Also GACP and FHA made decision makers aware that the GFR is an important ecosystem. There is a growing interest in supporting its conservation. With FHA advocacy for its larger protection, RDB and RNRA are in the process of upgrading it to a national park and already produced the draft law. Also Rwanda Environment Management Authority (REMA) is initiating a project to restore the Gishwati landscape under a support from Global Environment Facility (GEF) through the World Bank.

Local people and the forest

The community that lives around the GFR understands their rights to the forest and the punitive actions that may be taken. Apart from the community outreach activities that FHA organizes, the Community Forest Protection Initiative Agents (Eco-guards), Sectors and Cells officials educate local people about the punitive measures and their rights. Also FHA tries its best to support local people in alternative livelihoods including beekeeping, community tourism, employment, agro-forestry and capacity building of cooperatives. Therefore, there is an increase in local support to the conservation of the GFR. Basing on assessment results, the attitudes of local people towards the conservation of this forest positively changed moving from 27% in 2008 to 56% in 2011 and to 75% in 2013. With education and outreach, local people understand why the forest is so important for microclimate, their health and agricultural productivity. In 2005 and 2006, local people experienced increase in temperatures in the area and started suffering from malaria, a disease that it took time for them to understand. Also the agricultural productivity sharply reduced because of erosion of fragile soils that were cultivated after cutting down the forest, thus transforming their agricultural plots on steep slopes into pastureland. The experience they lived when the forest was cut down and the current one with the forest restoration help them to support the forest conservation because they have tangible facts that help them to compare both scenarios.

Project preparation

The idea of drafting the management plan for the GFR came from stakeholders from the central and local government in FHA quarterly stakeholder meeting of November 2013. Upgrading the GFR to a national park originally came from the meeting between Paul Kagame, President of Rwanda, and Ted Townsend, former Founder and Chair of the Great Apes Trust in 2007 when they met at the Clinton Global Initiative in New York. Townsend committed himself to help the country to found a national conservation park in Rwanda to benefit climate, biodiversity and the welfare of the Rwandan people. As a result, the Great Apes Trust established GACP in Rwanda in 2008. Since then all activities to restore the forest reserve were planned towards this goal. It is fortunate that when GACP closed in 2011 because of the dissolution of the Great Ape Trust, the Rwandan government interest to upgrade the GFR to a national park was maintained and progress was made towards this goal: RNRA/FNC confirmed the boundaries of the new park and RDB drafted the law. It is a good timing for FHA to draft the management plan for the GFR because its supports well this process of upgrading the forest to a National Park. Local people are well prepared and excited to the new management of the forest because they expect to get revenue from tourism. Also FHA supported the community to organize themselves into groups that are preparing community tourism products including traditional dancing, traditional healing, beekeeping and local agricultural and pastoralist culture.

When GACP closed, local people showed that they are committed to the conservation of this forest. Former eco-guards worked for six monthly volunteering in forest patrols and community education, and local farmers reported their colleagues who were illegally using the forest resources to FHA and Cells officials. This passion motivated FHA to create the Community Forest Protection Initiative with confidence that it will be supported by local people. People in Cells adjacent to the forest selected 6 Community Forest Protection Initiative Agents whose role is patrolling the forest and educating local people about the

importance of the forest and the biodiversity that it shelters. Under this CEPF grant we are planning to create Community Forest Protection Initiative Committees that will supervise the work of the Agents and assist them to report crimes to government officials at Cell level and to the National Police operating in the area. The Agents were only supervised by FHA and the Agents were the ones who were reporting the crimes to government officials for law enforcements. We are confident that once these Committees are created, the local ownership will increase and the Agents will concentrate more on the forest patrols and education. In the quarterly stakeholders meetings that we organize with community and other stakeholders, local people showed their interest to create these Committees as one of the way they can contribute more to the GFR conservation. Some of the Cells officials reported organizing themselves at Cell level and stopped illegal sale of natural forest resources such as firewood, timber and handcraft materials. When we informed stakeholders about the components of this project in our quarterly meeting of May 2014, they were very supportive and expressed the will to help.

Project implementation

We believe that local people who illegally collect the natural resources from the forest can stop it if they get aware of the importance of the forest and its biodiversity and if they get tangible benefits from conserving it. That is why FHA first priority in forest protection activities, is to educate people about the importance of conserving the GFR and its biodiversity, the second priority is collecting information about the illegal use of the forest resources and reporting offenders for sanctions comes as the third priority. The Agents give illegal actors up to four warnings before reporting them to government officials at Cell level and the national police for law enforcement. Each time that the offender is found conducting an illegal activity; he signs a statement (the document explaining that he understood the explanations given by the Agents to him about the importance of the forest and its biodiversity and that he commits himself to not enter the forest again). During monthly meetings, the Agents give signed statements to FHA Coordinator who files them at the FHA office. Under this CEPF grant, we will continue the same procedure but involve more Cells officials and include the community Committees. Offenders will be requested to sign the statements that will be kept a FHA office. The Agents will report to the Committees, the offenders who will have signed more than 4 statements. The copies of statements will be shared with the Committees (who will report crimes to Cells officials) and the Cells officials and the national police operating in the area for law enforcement. FHA, Agents, the Committees and Cells officials will organize quarterly meetings in which they will invite people who will receive punishments to better understand their issues and what support they must need to reduce their illegal use of the forest resources.

FHA already supports local community in improving their livelihoods as alternative to what they were getting from the forest use. We support local farmers in a beekeeping business around the forest, 10 local cooperatives in income generating activities and capacity building and four of them are supported in eco-tourism development. All of them use income to buy alternatives of what they were collecting from the forest. Also nine of our ten FHA employees are from local villages. The income they earn helps them to improve their families' lives, thus reduced illegal use of the forest resources. We also assisted local people to plant trees along the fences of their pastures and in partnership with a Government afforestation project, farmers received agro-forestry seedlings that they planted on their pastures and agricultural land. We also supported eco-clubs to plant trees on their schools' compounds. This provide alternative source of firewood and timber. Under this CEPF grant, we plan to continue liaising with Rutsiro district and Sectors so that they continue providing agro-forestry seedlings to farmers around the GFR. Also we will continue encouraging local farmers to visit the government nurseries to pick up the seedlings because they are given for free mainly during the tree week. We will also continue to support the ongoing projects on alternative livelihoods and will continue seeking funding for more livelihoods activities.

Regarding the development of the five year management plan, we will ensure that local people, local government and the central government are fully engaged as we explained this in the submitted project proposal.

Monitoring and Evaluation

As mentioned above, FHA organizes quarterly meetings with all stakeholders to evaluate the work of the Community Forest Protection Initiative. These meetings will be maintained and activities related to the work of Community Forest Protection Initiative Agents in forest patrols and community education, Community Forest Protection Initiative Committees in supervising the Agents and reporting crimes, and the work of Cells officials and the national police in law enforcement will be discussed during these meetings. FHA Coordinator will organize separate and joint monthly meetings with the Agents, the Committees and Cells officials to discuss the progress and issues. Also the progress on the development of the draft management plan will be discussed in the quarterly meetings. However, FHA Coordinator will closely work with the Technical Assistant who will be hired to develop this plan to ensure that she/he drafts the good document according to the terms of reference that will be agreed upon with key stakeholders. Other stakeholders meetings are planned at the beginning and during the development of the management plan as it is described in the submitted proposal.